

URVAŚI'S CHARACTER — A NEW APPROACH OF STUDY

The name of a celestial damsel viz. Urvaśi is very famous as the symbol of feminine beauty in the Sanskrit literature beginning from the age of the *Rgveda* to the days of Kālidāsa. Her name is associated with the *Rgveda*, *Brāhmaṇa*, classical Sanskrit and even *Purāṇa* Literature¹. It appears that perhaps no other female name except that of Urvaśi has occurred in such a long period of about three thousand years in the history of Sanskrit literature. From the Vedic literature to the classical Sanskrit literature, Urvaśi is represented by all without exception as a beauty-par-excellence, a symbol of beauty that attracts a king and a sage alike and as such her name is derived as that one who pervades a male in sex-enjoyment² etc. She is also described as a proud woman, conscious of her beauty, self willed and even hard hearted.

Her character is varied in nature and there seems to be the three different aspects and interpretations of her character viz. Vedic, Classical and modern interpretations from sociologicistic view to mystical view of Aurobindo. An attempt is made here in brief to study such views in order to understand the character of Urvaśi from different angles. In a way this is a new approach of study to read her character.

Let us begin with the Vedic age. There is a well known hymn in the *Rgveda*³ in which we come across a dialogue between Purūravas and Urvaśi. The contents of the dialogue reveal Urvaśi's character. She was a beauty-paragon to whom Purūravas had solicited her love again and again, she laid down certain conditions for accepting his

1. *Rgveda saṃhitā*, IV, 2, 18; V, 41, 19; VII, 33, 11; X, 95; *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XI, 5, 1, Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaśiyam*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, IX, 14, etc.

2. *Nirukta*, *Naigama Kāṇḍa*, 47 with Durga's Commentary, Venkateshvara press, Śake, 1847, pp. 395-804, 816.

3. *Rgveda*, X, 95, 1, 18.

love but she also said that there was no friendship with women folk, their hearts were the hearts of wolves⁴. Here she is represented as a selfwilled but a very cruel lady.

This dialogue-hymn seems to contain all the later legends on Urvaśī and Purūravas. Dr. A. B. Keith, Prof. Max-Muller and Dr. Geldner have given their own interpretations on this hymn⁵ regarding the purpose of the story, etc. We may not go into the details of their views but we will adhere ourselves to the interpretation of the word Urvaśī. Prof. Max-Muller finds the sun-dawn myth in the story to which Dr. A. B. Keith does not agree. According to Prof. Max-Muller, Urvaśī loves Purūravas — means the sun-rise, she sees him naked — means the dawn disappears, Urvaśī finding out her lover again means the sun-set. To Prof. Geldner the whole story was just one more of many *Itihāsa-purāṇas*. According to Dr. D. D. Kosambi, the primary reason for the survival of the hymn is its liturgical function⁶. He further says that the dialogue of Urvaśī and Purūravas is likewise meant to be a part of a ritual act performed by the two characters representing the principals and is thus a substitute for an earlier actual sacrifice of the male⁷. The story of Urvaśī also occurs in the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*⁸, and it is a running commentary on the Ṛgvedic hymn referred to above. This story tells us that Purūravas performed fire sacrifice with the upper āraṇi and lower āraṇi of Aśvattha and he became one of the Gandharvas. In the story Purūravas addresses Urvaśī as «ghore» meaning terrible one or hard hearted. This aspect of her character in the Vedic age is to be borne in mind.

As said earlier there is a sun-myth in the legend. Urvaśī herself says that she has passed over like the first of the dawns⁹. This indicates that Urvaśī attained the status of Uṣas. Shri. B. G. Tilak says that Saramā, crossing the waters to find out the cows stolen by Paṇis is similarly the dawn bringing with her the rays of the morning and when Urvaśī says that she is gone away and Purūravas calls himself Vaśiṣṭha or the brightest, it is the same dawn flying away from the embrace of the rising-sun¹⁰. We also come across the Urvaśīs in the plural form in the *Ṛgveda*¹¹, after the mention of Uṣas with the seven seers. According to Dr. Kosambi, in this reference the Urvaśīs must be the multiple Uṣas¹². This refers to the nymphs or water-born — fairy women or *apsaras*. In this context Dr. Kosambi sees fainter traces of a different

4. *Rgveda*, X, 95, 15.

5. Vide (a) A. B. KEITH, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upaniṣads*, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 31-32, p. 183. (b) MAX MÜLLER, *Chips from a German workshop*, vol. II, pp. 117-30. (c) K. F. GELDNER, *Vedische-Studien*, vol. I, pp. 243-95.

6. D. D. KOSAMBI, *Myth & Reality*, Popular Prakasan, 1962, p. 53.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

8. *S. Brā*, XI, 5, 1.

9. *Rgveda*, X, 95, 2.

10. B. G. TILAK, *Arctic Home in the Vedas*, 1956, pp. 223-24.

11. *Rgveda*, IV, 2, 18.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

type of hetaerism which seems related to survival of group marriage¹³ and in conclusion as a sociologist, he says that the Urvaśīs faded away but they are responsible nevertheless for the Goddesses of the later pantheon that are married peacefully to the major gods, their living representatives developed what became — with the rise of a trading society and a cash economy before the Mauryan period — commercialised prostitution¹⁴.

This brief survey of Urvaśī's character in the Vedic age reveals the following aspects, (a) a cruel hard hearted lady (b) the Uṣas type character (c) a very bold, proud beautiful nymph willing to sacrifice her lover (d) a type of a refined gifted prostitute.

Let us go to the etymology of the word of Urvaśī as a nymph before we examine her character in classical literature. The following are the various explanations of the word Urvaśī. The *Nirukta*¹⁵ says as follow: « Urvaśī is the name of the water-nymph, etymologically it means — that one who pervades excessively, largely, widely, or that one who pervades a great fame or that one who pervades a male in sex-act or one whose *kāma* is great, is very powerful, one who has subdued passions ». The *Bṛhaddevatā* takes the speech goddess Vāc as equated to Durgā, Saramā, Urvaśī and Yamī in the middle sphere¹⁶, and to Uṣas¹⁷ and Urvaśī is derived as 'Uruvāsinī'¹⁸. The *Śabdakalpadruma* simply says that Urvaśī is the famous named divine prostitute¹⁹. It is also said therein that she is born of the thigh of Nārāyaṇa and so she is named Urvaśī. Moreover she is « apsaras » because she is the mistress of the middle region who carries off waters from the clouds and flashes herself²⁰. She is also a water-nymph because she always moves in waters, being born of waters, waters are dearer to her and so a water-nymph, she is endowed with beauty, she has a special form and beauty among all women²¹. A great scholar Rāhula Sāṅkṛityāyana gives a very interesting etymology. According to him Urvaśī means one who sits in the heart or who has occupied the heart (of course of a lover) and « apsaras » means one who swims in waters²². It is needless to point out that this derivation is akin to earlier ones explained above.

These etymological meanings clearly bring out Urvaśī's character viz. (1) She is the beauty symbol (2) She has the attractive capacity and she can seduce any male (3) She is born of waters (4) She is looked upon as a divine prostitute. All these explanations about her

13. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

15. *Nirukta*, Naigama Kāṇḍa, 47.

16. *Bṛhaddevatā*, II, 77.

17. *Bṛhaddevatā*, II, 79-80.

18. *Ibid.*, II, 5-9.

19. « *Svanāma-khyāta-svargaveśyā* ».

20. See *Nirukta* with Durga's Commentary, Venkatesvara Press, Sake 1847, p. 805.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 395-97.

22. R. SĀṆKRITYĀYANA, *Volga te Gangā* (Marathi edition), 1977, p. 142.

character are definitely based on her character as found in the Vedic as well as classical literature.

Let us take into account Urvaśī's character in classical literature. Urvaśī has been immortalised by Kālidāsa in his famous drama *Vikramorvaśīya*. She is represented therein as a divine lady born of the lap of the sage Nārāyana, the very tender weapon of lord Indra always jealous of uncommon austerities, a lady who has thrown-into-background Lakṣmī proud of her beauty and who is the ornament of heaven²³. According to King Purūravas her physical form is the ornament of ornaments, the excellent decoration of all decorations and a pattern even for the standard of comparison²⁴. She is the centrifugal force of the drama. Purūravas belongs to somavamśa — moon's race, the moon-planet is the planet of mind and it is no wonder that King's mind hankers after beauty of Urvaśī and this is the natural effect of mind. Her character in the drama is viewed differently by different scholars. According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, Urvaśī's character is some what removed from normal life, she has the power to watch her lover unseen and overheard his conversations, she is lacking maternal affection for she abandons her child rather than lose her husband, her love is selfish and her transformation is the direct outcome of a fit of insane jealousy²⁵. According to Prof. H. D. Velankar²⁶, throughout the drama she remains an unmarried consort of the king. which is quite in keeping with her position at the court of Indra, throughout the drama Urvaśī behaves like a sincere woman deeply in love with her lover, leaving aside her superiority complex which is so obvious in the Vedic Version of the story. Details of the story in the drama are not given here for the simple reason that they are quite well known and popular. Whatever may be the criticism, Kālidāsa has faithfully portrayed her picture in his Kālidāsan touch, he has changed the entire character of Urvaśī of the Vedic age with the introduction of the curse of Bharata, in order to represent her as a true beloved with her frank and charming womanliness. In Kālidāsa no reference is made about her conditions to stay with Purūravas or her request to her lover to become a Gandharva, she is glorified, she is a sincere beloved like a mortal woman on the earth but at the same time very proud of her beauty and jealous. This seems to be not the only intention of Kālidāsa to paint her. His intention may be imagined to portray sensuous but imaginative Purūravas who is in love with divine beauty. This is not found in character of Purūravas and Urvaśī in the Vedic literature. In a way this is an improvement in their characterisation.

23. KĀLIDĀSA, *Vikramorvaśīya*, Act-I.

24. *Id.*, Act-II-3.

25. Prof. H. D. VELANKAR, *Sāhitya Akādemi's Vikramorvaśīya of Kālidāsa*, 1961, Dh. Radhakrishnan's General Introduction, p. XXV.

26. *Ibid.*, Editor's Introduction, pp. XXXIV-XXXV.

Apart from this drama of Kālidāsa, it can be said that other references to Urvaśi in *Purāṇas* and other literature are quite negligible and they require no serious study, since the nature of hers remains practically the same. However we may refer to some important points in that connection.

The *Matsya* and *Padma Purāṇas* speak of the curse and her sincere love for the hero²⁷, other *Purāṇas* like *Devī-Bhāgavata*, *Bhāgavata*, *Agnī-purāṇa* etc. give a different version of her story with a favourite motif of a curse in the part of the story. But the main aspects of Urvaśi's character viz. her beauty, pride etc. remain more or less the same. The story of Urvaśi is also found in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*²⁸ of Somadeva.

In the Mahabharata we find that Bhīṣma says of Urvaśi as one of the purest nymphs²⁹, and he prays for protection. Urvaśītīrtha as a sacred place is also mentioned³⁰. She is also mentioned in the Mahābhārata³¹ in the context of Arjuna to whom she approaches under the influence of passion but when her love is rejected she curses Arjuna to become impotent. In the Jain Rāmāyaṇa of Vimalasūri, it is mentioned that Urvaśi was one of the nymphs and she was one of the wives of Rāvaṇa³². Raviṣeṇa's Padmacarita also speaks of her as one of the beloveds of Rāvaṇa³³.

Curious as it is, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa says that one who desires a woman should perform worship in honour of Urvaśi, in other words one desirous of a wife should take «vow of Urvasi»³⁴.

It is a well known story that Urvaśi is born of the thigh of Nārāyaṇa³⁵. Nārāyaṇa is normally identified with Viṣṇu who is originally a sun-deity to whom the firmament of the sky becomes his region. It is said in Kālidāsa³⁶ that Urvaśi is flying into the Sky — the middle region of her father as representing through the second stride of Vāmana as well through the progress of the sky, her father thus becomes identified with Viṣṇu whose middle region is represented through the second step of his incarnation-form Vāmana. This also can explain her association with Viṣṇu who is originally a sun-deity.

Now let us take into account the views of Aurobindo in the context of Urvaśi's character³⁷. According to Rabindronath Tagore, Urvaśi of the myth is the spirit of imaginative beauty in the Universe, the un

27. *Padma Purāṇa*, *Sṛṣṭikhāṇḍa*, 12, 62-86. *Matsya Purāṇa*, 24, 10, 32. *Agnī Purāṇa*, 275, 12-14; *Bhāgavata*, IX, 14, 47, etc.

28. *Kathāsaritsāgara*, III, 4, 30.

29. *Mahābhārata*, *Anuśāsanaparva*, 165, 15.

30. *Mahābhārata*, *Vanaparva*, 84, 57.

31. *Mahābhārata*, *Vanaparva*, 45, 46.

32. VIMALASŪRI's, *Paumacariya*, 74, 8.

33. *Padmacarita*, 77, 12.

34. *Bhāgavata*, 2, III, 6.

35. *Vikra.*, Act I, 3, and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 11, 4.

36. *Vikra.*, I, 18.

37. ŚRĪ AUROBINDO, *Kālidāsa*, 2nd series, 1954, pp. 43-85.

attainable ideal for which the soul of man is eternally panting, the goddess adored of the nympholept in all lands and in all ages. There is but one who can attain her, the man whose mind has become one mass of poetry and idealism and has made life itself identical with poetry, whose glorious and starlike career has itself been a conscious epic and whose soul holds friendship and close converse with the gods. This is Purūravas, the noise of whom has gone far and wide, whose mother was Ilā divine aspiration, the strange daughter of human mind — (Manu) who was once a male and is female and his father Budha, inspired and mystic vision. Hermes of the moonlike mind and his near ancestors therefore are the sun and the moon. It is therefore one of the most profound and splendid of the many profound and splendid allegories in the great repertory of Hindu myth that Kālidāsa has here rendered into so sweet, natural and passionate a story of human love and desire. The religious interpretation of the myth which is probably older than the poetical is slightly but not materially different³⁸. As Shri. Aurobindo opines that Kālidāsa's presentation of hers is simply that of a beautiful and radiant woman, deeply in love, the essential idea of her is natural, frank and charming womanliness, swift, innocent and frank passion, warm affections as mother, sister and friend, speech always straight from her heart the precise elements in fact that give their greatest charm to ideal girlhood and womanhood are the main tones that compose the picture³⁹. He rightly observes that Kālidāsa took special pains to prevent even the most hide bound commentator from reading into her character any touch of heavenly courtesan; the obstentatious splendours the conscious allurements of the courtesans are not there but rather a divine simplicity and white candour of soul, it is from innate purity and openness that the frankness and impulsiveness of her love proceed⁴⁰. Aurobindo's observation of the creation of Urvaśī is worth-noting. He says that Nārāyana called this daughter of his creation Urvaśī — (she who lies in the thigh of the supreme, the thigh being the seat of sensuousness) and gave her to Indra to be his most potent defence against the austerities of spiritual longing, it is Urvaśī who sprang from the thigh of the withered hermit cold and not any of those original daughters of the innocent waves who is the loveliest and most dangerous of the Apsaras, the relations of Urvaśī and Purūravas are true to this psychological principle, she herself is mere beauty and charm sufficient to itself and commanding delight and worship because she is herself, not because of any graces of expression, imagination, intellectual profundity but the mind of Purūravas receiving her pure and perfect image steps her in its own fire and colour, surrounding her with a halo of pomp and glory which reveals himself while seeking to interpret her⁴¹.

38. Quoted in AUROBINDO'S, *Kālidāsa*, 2nd series, 1954, pp. 54-5.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-100.

Thus we have taken in brief, the survey of Urvaśi's character from the Vedic age to modern age. It appears that there are four aspects involved in her character as interpreted by old and modern scholars such as

- (a) religious rite — ritualistic side of her character viz. actual sacrifice of the male, or sun myth in the Vedic age;
- (b) her seductive character in the *Mahābhārata-Purāṇa* literature and accordingly the etymologies of the word Urvaśi are derived in *Nirukta*, Pāṇini and later lexicons of Sanskrit;
- (c) her poetic and dramatic character with fine human touch in Kālidāsa's famous drama *Vikramorvaśīya*;
- (d) sociologist's view like that of Dr. D. D. Kosambi — viz. Urvaśi — connected with group marriage, thereby, suggesting her traits of prostitute character, later on commercialised, views of Rabin-dranath Tagore and Aurobindo who find mystical view in her character viz. soul running after beauty, no touch of prostitution in her character as already noted in the foregone pages.

If we take into account all such aspects of Urvaśi's character in their entirety as found in Sanskrit literature already referred to, we find that there is a gradual development of her character. The Ṛgvedic age is the poetic age in the real sense of the term in which prayer and simple sacrifice are highly valued as such Urvaśi is depicted as a divine damsel, a water nymph, compared with Uṣas who is again a beauty symbol. In the age of the *Brāhmaṇas*, her name was connected with sacrificial act, though her charms and beauty were retained in her character. Sacrifices of various types in the Vedic age were quite symbolic in nature and character. A story of Urvaśi and Purūravas can be viewed as symbolic in character, though actual practice may not be refuted. By the time of the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas* her poetic — beauteous character was fully developed and she was given a due place therein. As seen earlier, she has been considered as worthy of prayer by Bhīṣma for the sake of protection and she has been assigned a place in the list of sacred places along with other sacred places of rivers etc. In a way she seems to be deified in this age, when we come to Kālidāsa, we find that Kālidāsa was an artist first and he had all the earlier information of Urvaśi and he moulded her character beautifully with his golden touch as pointed out by Aurobindo. Kālidāsa painted Purūravas a hero born in the soma-race, soma of poetic mind, running after divine beauteous soul of Urvaśi and thus he exalted her character. Urvaśi too a beauteous soul hankered after love of Purūravas who was a hero in name and quality; such a man alone was fit to aspire and win the incarnate beauty of the universe. This indeed is the true character of Urvaśi as viewed by Kālidāsa.

Last but not the least is the mystical view of Aurobindo and Rabin-drath Tagore. Both of them as seen earlier rightly point out that there is no point in finding out any traits of a prostitute in such a lovely character of Urvaśī. It will be a gross injustice to Urvaśī to stamp her as prostitute or to attach any social — religious motif to her character.

She represents the symbol of beauty which is sought by a human soul like that of Purūravas for bliss. Indian poetry is the creation of an Aryan mind on this firm mystical background because it is composed by « seers and hearers of the Truth »; this literature also symbolises religious-ethical aesthetic and spiritual side of the race.

Such a new approach of study of Urvaśī's character is necessary, without such study, it is impossible to read her character in true Indian colours. This new approach of study reveals that Urvaśī's character is to be appreciated as the symbol of beauty and divine grace, instead of studying it from various angles as shown earlier.

It is needless to point out that no practical purpose or motif be attached to any piece of good literature or art. The purpose of poetry is to produce bliss or divine bliss — *bahamānanda* in the minds of readers, as said by Mammaṭa and other rhetoricians⁴². If we analyse the characters like those of Urvaśī and Purūravas from social or religious or such other angles, the very beauty and charm of these characters will be lost. To conclude it may be said that Urvaśīs' character is worthy of appreciation and study as a mere piece of poetic creation in the real sense of the term. A human soul is always in search of divine beauty for bliss alone and we may find that divine beauty in Urvaśīs character for the attainment of bliss. Here lies the mystery and secret of Urvaśī's character.

42. Mammaṭa's *Kāvya-prakāś*, I. Viśvanātha's *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, I.